News Release

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Photos and interviews available. See below.

Wildflower Back from Extinction After 69 Years
U.C. Berkeley Propogates Rare Plant Discovered at Mt. Diablo State Park

BERKELEY – When the Mount Diablo buckwheat was rediscovered a year ago at Mt. Diablo State Park, there were only 20 plants. Now, there are more than 100 of them.

It's unclear as to what might have led to the increase in the wild population. Meanwhile, the group is celebrating successful germination of 12 seeds at the University of California Botanical Garden at Berkeley, where they announced their success at a news conference today.

"The Mount Diablo buckwheat is a Bay Area treasure," said Cyndy Shafer, an environmental scientist for the California Department of Parks and Recreation, who leads the Mount Diablo Buckwheat Working Group. "The plants may be small, but they demonstrate the immense importance of protected lands in preserving biological diversity. Mt. Diablo can be seen from 200 miles away, but the impact of this conservation success story inspires people all around the world."

The Mount Diablo buckwheat (*Eriogonom truncatum*) flower resembles a small pink powder puff version of the baby's breath used in floral arrangements. It is one of only three plants endemic to Mount Diablo State Park.

When it was rediscovered by U.C. Berkeley graduate student Michael Park in May 2005, East Bay botanists described it as "the holy grail," said Barbara Ertter, the U.C. Berkeley Jepson Herbarium curator. The wildflower had not been seen since 1936 and was presumed globally extinct. Ironically, the last sighting in the 1930s had been documented by another U.C. Berkeley graduate student. That person was Mary Bowerman who later founded Save Mount Diablo in 1971.

The initial rediscovery last year unleashed a windstorm of public attention around the world, coming just weeks after the rediscovery of the ivory-billed woodpecker, also long thought extinct. While the bird's rediscovery is in question, the buckwheat is a certainty. Forbes initially collected the wildflower's seed and provided it to propagator John Domzalski, who successfully germinated a dozen plants at the U.C. Botanical Garden.

"A fundamental step in helping ensure the continued existence of rare plant species is to learn how to germinate and grow the plants so that more seed can be collected. Once we can do that, we can increase the numbers of seeds available for new populations as well as for back-up in long-term storage," said Holly Forbes, curator and conservation officer at the U.C. Botanical Garden.

"When I saw the buckwheat seedlings this year, I was relieved to know that the rediscovery wasn't just a once in a lifetime observation, and that the plants had persevered," said student Michael Park. He continues to monitor the wild population at Mount Diablo State Park.

(more)

"The Mount Diablo Buckwheat is edging back from the brink of extinction, but it's still critically threatened," said Seth Adams, Director of Land Programs for Save Mount Diablo, which preserved the land where the plant was rediscovered.

"We held our breath until the wild plants showed up again and all spring we've felt like proud parents as the first seeds sprouted and the botanical garden plants grew."

Since the discovery, botanists have searched other likely areas of the park for the threatened wildflowers and none have been found.

The botanical garden plans to continue collecting seed from the wild and from the plants in cultivation, and propagating the buckwheat as part of its conservation mission. Nearly one in four native California species, many rare and endangered, are represented in the garden's collection, and the staff often works with state and other agencies to conserve endangered species.

The Group's intent is to plant seeds in other locations near the Mount Diablo population in 2007 and to continue to build the collected seed base with the possibility of planting new sites at other Mt. Diablo locations. Until the population increases, the plant continues to be critically threatened.

The Mt. Diablo Buckwheat Working Group includes representatives of the U.C. Botanical Garden, California Dept. of Fish & Game, California State Parks, California Native Plant Society, Save Mount Diablo, U.C. Berkeley Jepson Herbarium and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, as well as the plant's rediscoverer, Michael Park. The group was convened on June 7, 2005.

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

High Resolution Photos Available:
http://www.heinphoto.com/smd/buckwheat/pc20060607.htm and
http://www.savemountdiablo.org/Mt%20Diablo%20buckwheat%20propagated.htm
For photos, contact Seth Adams at (925) 947-3535 or sadams@savemountdiablo.org
Please credit: Scott Hein/Save Mount Diablo

Wildflower Rediscovered: Background & Other Quotes

Based on the Working Group's Interim Management Recommendations, half of the plants were caged and several hundred seed were collected from the annual wildflowers at the end of the flowering season in late-June 2005. Over the next five months an Interim Management Plan was developed.

Approximately 100 plants germinated this spring at the Mt. Diablo site and 12 were germinated at the botanical garden. Most of them at each location are now in bloom.

"I just returned from the field site," said Michael Park, during the press conference. "The buckwheat plants are looking good, they're smaller than last year, several hundred seed are already on the ground and several hundred more are about to drop. There are 69 remaining plants; many of the others have already set seed. The late bloomers were the first to go into fruit. The site that's been weeded, helping them with competition from non-natives, is doing much better in terms of numbers of plants, size of plants and number of seeds.

"The opportunity to watch the plants from one year to the next and from seedling to fruiting has been a remarkable opportunity to study something no one else had—working with the Mt. Diablo buckwheat is a once in a lifetime opportunity," said Park.

"Last year the media seemed overwhelming—the television and live radio interviews were a first for me," said Park, "but I've been enthused about sharing my experience and what I've learned with others. The experience has created opportunities I'd never have had otherwise. It's given me the opportunity to work with people interested in conservation and the chance to do intensive research on something this rare and special—something that was thought lost."

"We're really lucky to have so much expertise represented in the Working Group. We're breaking new ground in learning about the Mt. Diablo buckwheat," said Cyndy Shafer, an Environmental Scientist for California State Parks, and leader of the Working Group.

"Conservation efforts on behalf of rare plants depend in large part on our learning to grow them in cultivation to reproductive maturity," said Holly Forbes, curator and conservation officer at the U.C. Botanical Garden at Berkeley. "Success in achieving seed set in cultivation takes the burden off the natural population for attempts to create additional populations in the wild."

Nearly one in four native California species, many rare and endangered, are represented in the garden's collection, and the staff often works with state and other agencies to conserve endangered species.

Interim Management Guidelines

The Working Group has agreed that until more is known about the Mount Diablo buckwheat, a conservative approach should be taken to its management. No major management actions will be taken this year at Mt. Diablo except to conserve the species. The group focused on site characterization, surveys, and monitoring until the plant was propagated.

Wildflower Rediscovered: Summary of Actions Taken to Date

- Approximately 20 plants were found in May 2005, 12 matured, but two were dominant.
- The Mount Diablo Buckwheat Working Group was formed on June 7, 2005.
- Interim Management guidelines were developed in June 2005.
- The location of the population has been mapped using GPS.
- Access will be restricted, even from botanists and staff.
- Chicken wire cages were installed at the site on June 13, 2005; one around a single large plant, and one around a cluster of a few plants, to prevent disturbance to those plants. Other plants were left uncaged.
- Small metal staples were placed in the soil next to each plant in order to mark the locations to see if plants grow in the same spots next year. (June 2005)
- Seed was collected off the ground from at least five plants (June 2005), and stored at UC Berkeley.
- Surface soil samples were collected at the site and analyzed.
- The plant population was monitored through the growing season, and at regular intervals in 2006.
- An Interim Management Plan was developed in October 2005.
- 100 seeds were sowed at the UC Berkeley Botanical Garden in November and December. A fungicide was applied to prevent 'damping off,' and 12 germinated in March 2006.
- On an April 1, 2006 Mt. Diablo monitoring visit, 90 plants were counted, all near locations of previous plants, introduced competing non-native plants were weeded out in the areas not caged. The population peaked in May at just over 100 plants. There is some evidence that the species needs minor disturbance to thrive.
- Plants at the Botanical Garden began to flower in late May 2006.
- Updates will be distributed to the media in mid June, 2006 to keep the public informed.